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“EATS”

BY ELIZABETH ROBINS PENNELL

It is astonishing how lightly we take the serious things of life. We eat our three meals a day regularly, and any number of non-descript meals between, and it never occurs to us to stop to consider their influence not only upon our daily life but upon the fate of humanity. And yet, what we are is the result of the way we have eaten, just as surely as what we shall be depends on the way we eat now.

The art of cooking humanized the brute. Civilization began in the kitchen. Nothing less than the desire for food in new varieties would have lured arboreal man from his tree. He may have been a primitive saurian, or a primitive ape, when he first climbed up it, but climbing down again made a primitive man of him. If he showed his first glimmer of intelligence by hunting below the tree for variety, he was prompt beyond belief in learning to vary still further what he found. You can take Brillat-Savarin's word for it, though he was not an ethnologist,—only a genius,—that man kindled his first fire to dry and to roast and that, without fire, he would never have got anywhere at all. To possess himself of a permanent oven he built a house to live in, and next, to protect house and oven, he gathered together with his fellow men in villages. The necessity eating was to him, he fancied it must be to the spirits and ghosts who protected or persecuted him and, to propitiate them, he offered them choice samples from his larder and his cellar, the offering inspiring him to ceremonial, to poetry and song, to all the arts. As his methods and taste improved, he discovered a fresh inconvenience in chance catering and marketing and, close to his village, he sowed corn or its equivalent; he planted vineyards and orchards; he raised poultry; he domesticated sheep and cattle and swine. His search now was not so much for new varieties of food as for new methods of preparing it, new sensations in devouring it. From a flinger of raw

meat on the embers, or the burier of it in a hole with hot stones, he developed into an artist, a master of technique. The chance he had given up in his cooking and catering, disappeared from his serving. Dinner became a ceremonial. No public or private joy or sorrow was without its feast and the feasting, abroad and at home, was a new inspiration to art and literature. Dionysus and Demeter disputed with Apollo and Aphrodite for the sculptor's favor and the poet's. The philosophy of Socrates soared to its loftiest heights when he dined with his friends. The shepherds of Theocritus sang their sweetest when their great goddess stood by the wine-press, smiling, with sheaves and poppies in her hand. The odes of Horace would lose their charm had Rome gone dry and Federal Agents emptied his Falernian in the gutter.

When the blight of asceticism fell upon Europe, and dried dates were exalted above the art of the cook, man was plunged into a darkness out of which he might never have emerged if little cloistered communities had not served God by saving what they could from the general wreck. With the dawning of the new light the art of cookery was reborn gloriously and, one after the other, all the arts came into their own again. We turn up our superior noses at the recipes of Cælius Apicius, of such nastiness that learned commentators dismiss them as "garbage," but, nevertheless, he did for the art of cookery what Cimabue and Giotto did for the art of painting. He was the link between the old that had all but perished and the new that was to be, though the new did not come to perfection until, in the seventeenth century, Varenne published his *Cuisinier François*, a less delectable prize for the collector than his *Patissier François*, but "the starting point of modern cookery." It taught the virtue of order, of simplicity and harmony, in the composition and serving of every dish. Though there were lapses, as there must always be if an art is to evade the failure of perfection, the tendency after Varenne was to improve quality and decrease quantity, not to see how much could be devoured at a sitting and what good time could be made, or how the diner could stuff himself into immobility, but rather how much pleasure could be got from the savor of a sauce or the perfection of a roast; how an art could be made of dining as well as of cooking.

So far America shares the history of cooking with the rest of the world. We did not shake the traditions of Europe from off our feet when we sailed away in the *Mayflower*, and no Promised Land was ever readier than our New World to overflow with corn and oil and wine, nor had prohibition in those old happy days as yet laid its ban upon one item of our Biblical plenty. But at once we set about squandering our blessings wholesale and, not content with this, we are now getting rid of the quality of what remains with the same cheerful indifference. We prostitute our meat, our poultry, our game, our fish, our eggs, our vegetables, our anything and everything that is fresh and fair and flawless, to the monster of cold storage. We have looked upon the fruits of our land, tasted them, known them to be good, and then stored them away until their flavor is frozen out of them, and the cook must exercise his ingenuity to disguise their tastelessness. If the earlier cooks we scorn were lavish with *asafoetida*, reckless in joining savories to sweets, sugar to spice, it was to disguise not the too little but the too much flavor in meat or game, fish or fowl. Our refrigerator, which saves us from this danger, used in moderation, could have led us to heights unscaled by Varenne. But commerce swooped down upon it, seeing an opening for still another middleman, a chance for keeping back cheap meat until a season of soaring prices, for putting away plentiful crops until a year of lean harvests; and everybody is happy, even the people who now eat without either profit or pleasure. Nourishment has gone; what is worse, taste has gone; and eating has become a mere mechanical stowing away of fuel to keep the machine working. We eat, we know not what. Beef, mutton, pork, veal are as one; vegetables vary only in name. So accustomed have we become to the universal tastelessness that we disdain the fruit that grows at our door to clutch at the fruit from far States: fruit as delicate as strawberries and peaches, whose savor and delicacy are chilled out of them on the journey. We pay big prices in fashionable restaurants, more moderate prices at popular lunch counters, but wherever we go, whatever we pay, it is always cold storage we eat.

Escape is possible for people who live at home, and a few take advantage of the possibility. The outlook would indeed be hopeless were there no exceptions. The American dinner in its per-

fection is not to be excelled. But too often the perfection is not allowed to speak for itself, and a dinner, like a painting, is not perfect until the endeavor to make it so disappears. The American overemphasizes everything, from the sitting down at table to the getting up. The old groaning board, under which diners paid their tribute, has ceased to be correct; but under his lavish display of china and glass and silver and flowers and lights his new board groans as obviously. He observes order in the succession of the courses, as fashion decrees; but that harmony and simplicity in each may not be mistaken for parsimony or poverty, he provides a second plate upon which an accumulation of bread, rolls, toast, butter, nuts, celery, proves what he could do if convention allowed. When it comes to the roast, he can restrain himself no longer but deposits a "generous portion" on the same plate with an unbelievable collection of sauces, gravies, stuffings, jellies, vegetables. He will even in season set asparagus swimming in the appalling mess—asparagus that is dishonored by the addition of anything more substantial than Hollandaise. For salad, he pours vinegar and oil over a medley of fruits that are ruined in the process; or if lettuce or romaine be preferred, he puts everything he ought not into the dressing, dumps cheese and marmalade into the unholy mixture, and then eats with it hot savory biscuits as further witnesses to the inexhaustible resources of his larder. As if this were not enough, the ice cream is drowned in sauce, each irreproachable in itself, both coarsened in combination, and further overpowered by cake as rich as money can buy. Everything is overdone, until the beauty of what should be a beautiful dinner is destroyed by the excess of superfluous and flamboyant ornament.

In less pleasant places the display is made in less pleasant ways. Plenty that shrieks at you is the restaurant's lure—who does not know those amazing windows filled up with enough cakes oozing cream to make you hope you may never see a cake again, or enough fruit to kill an army; or a heterogeneous assortment of delicacies to stagger the stoutest appetite? Some restaurants still barricade your dinner plate with a disconcerting array of little bird's bathtubs full of vegetables; others have exchanged them for that more modern horror, the Platter Dinner. The crowded Main and Side Dishes of earlier *menus* were bad enough in all

conscience; but at least their deplorable variety was distributed: only by the diner's choice was it all deposited upon his plate. The Platter Dinner leaves him no choice. On one vast surface the jumble is made ready for him, an offense to the eye and, more serious, to the palate. To eat so many things together is to taste nothing. Most serious of all, the jumble must be eaten at top speed or else it grows stone cold, reduced to a loathsome swamp of grease before the platter can be cleared.

Hurry to us as a nation is, of course, no grievance, for our pride is in what we think our hustling. The American business man would neglect a duty if he did not bolt a Quick Lunch, and, having accepted this Quick Lunch as our ideal, everything is arranged to quicken our already quick pace. Some *cafés* dispense with tables and set plates and cups and tumblers on the widened arm of a chair, an irresistible invitation to those who sit down to get promptly up again. Others retain the tables but crowd them too close to induce people, who do not enjoy being jostled like pigs at a trough, to stay longer than they can help. The Automat does better still, since, after you put your money in the slot, the sandwich or salad, the coffee or chocolate, that comes out may be swallowed as you stand—not one fraction of a second lost in a hunt for a seat. But it is the Cafeteria that does best. There, when at last you begin your lunch or dinner, you must be double quick in order to catch up the time you spent waiting in a long line as if you were at a railway ticket office; calculating how many knives, forks and spoons will see you through, not forgetting the paper napkin; pouncing upon odd morsels from huge tubs of food; balancing a heavy tray as your accumulations increase, as you recklessly dive into your pocket for money at the desk, as you scuffle for a table or a chair. And if you venture to slacken your pace while you gobble down soup, meat, salad, with the ice cream melting before your eyes, more weary tray-balancers at your back, scowling reproach, would cure you of your slowness. And yet, in one I tried for economy's sake—and paid for by my extravagance in the reaction—I have seen parsons, professors, army and navy officers, civil servants, museum directors, at the dinner hour, feeding, not dining, by this degrading method. I have seen children emerge triumphantly from the line with two portions of

ice cream and two of pie, exulting in their emancipation from the solids. I have heard of another where fashion gathers for lunch. Now, what can children brought up in this way, what can people willing to put up with the degradation, know of the art of dining or even of ordinary decency at table? As a result of our indifference, our own manners are going and our aliens are shedding the little courtesies they practised in their native lands. Our health is going. We have become as a nation puffy-faced, sallow, fat, through our eating the wrong thing, in the wrong way, at the wrong hour. The man who first wrote "Eats" above his restaurant door, spoke the truth better than he knew, in one word pointing out to us the depths to which we have sunk.

The idea of dinner as something to be rushed through and escaped from, has become national. In the most perfectly equipped restaurant you must hold on tight to your plate or the waiter will be off with it before you have eaten a mouthful. In the most perfectly appointed private house you might fancy a reward promised to the swiftest maid or butler. Dinner, rightly understood, is a ceremony, the great event of the day, a work of art to linger over, to delight in. Man has evolved no higher form of pleasure, none that is such an eloquent incentive to the art of conversation. When people do not devour their food as if a taxi was ticking away a fortune at their door, but talk as they dine, they talk their best. Could Socrates, in a cafeteria or over a platter, have spoken those words of wisdom that the modern uplifter, who never dines, so sadly misinterprets? Or could either platter or cafeteria have opened the willing mouth of our own Autocrat, even at the Breakfast Table? For dinner, wits once prepared their most brilliant flashes, gossips reserved their most joyous scandals, statesmen unbent to their most discreet indiscretions. In England, the Prime Minister still makes the Lord Mayor's banquet in November, the Royal Academy dinner in May, occasions for his most important statements to the public. In England the youth of the country still ask: "Is there anything better in the world than sitting at a table and eating good food and drinking great drink and discussing everything under the sun with wise and brilliant people?" We do not take time to know that food is good and drink is great—to talk ourselves or to listen to

others talk. We waste our golden chance with the same unconcern with which we have squandered the richness of our fields, our woods, and our waters. Talk, however brilliant, bores us to extinction. In restaurants we dance between the courses to make the dinner hour seem shorter; we cannot swallow our afternoon tea without two-stepping or toddling. At the public banquet, we must have movies to stare at or jazz—not music—to deafen us; anything to save us from talk. In private houses we gallop through the *chef's* masterpieces to get the sooner to the concert, the opera, the bridge table—always, everywhere, some reason for hurry, some excuse not to say anything ourselves or to let anybody else say it for us. We tear at express speed through our “Eats” and exalt ourselves as a model for all the world.

A few years ago the hope was that wine would show us the evil of our ways and reform them. For long we understood the art of drinking still less than the art of eating. No doubt the reason was the difficulty and expense of providing ourselves with wine before we had vineyards of our own. Certainly, we had no objection to wine. Philadelphia cellars, and perhaps cellars in other towns, are not yet emptied of the Madeira with which our forefathers filled them. Nor had we any objection to stronger waters. But when I was young the house was the exception where the Madeira was brought up every day from the cellar, while the stronger waters were gulped down at the club or the saloon by the men of the family on their way home to virtuous ice water. To drink at dinner was not usual, and this was why men drank harder in their clubs. In the saloon a man was not allowed, as in the civilized *café*, to stay as long as he chose for one little glass; he had to go unless he paid for a second. Custom made of Americans gluttons, not artists, in their drinking.

Wine is as essential as bread to a good dinner. The wise man would no more drink too much wine than eat too much bread, no more take odd drinks throughout the day than stuff himself between meals. But without wine dinner is not dinner for those who know what dining is. It is hard to say what it degenerates into when the substitute is coffee with milk, or milk by itself. Without wine, the public banquet becomes a funeral feast. How colorless the dreary lines of White Rock, and how the ice in the

glasses chills all thought of cheer! Is there a man—or woman—with any sense of things who would not find it as hard as Mr. Balfour to drink a health in water or lemon pop? Who will say that the old-fashioned bar was less good for us than the ice-cream-soda and French-pastry counter which fashionable hotels now advertise? It took centuries to perfect the wines of Europe, to study the special quality of each so as to know which should go with this course or that—centuries to produce even a *vin ordinaire* which the fastidious would not feel himself disgraced by drinking. We always could have the wines of Europe, that is, when we could pay for them; Europe's knowledge we inherited without charge; and gradually our own vineyards were supplying us with as good and sound wines at reasonable prices as the Frenchman or the Italian reserves for everyday use. Moreover, drunkenness was no longer considered good form. Fashion had begun to expect "gentlemen", whatever their nationality, to finish their dinner at, not under, the table. Everything promised for the best in the best of all lands. And then came—Prohibition.

Prohibition and Cold Storage between them have dulled and dimmed the color of life for the American. If the art of cookery and the art of dining made us what we are, what are we going to be when success crowns our present efforts to rid ourselves of both? Henry Adams may have been right, we may already have gone over the top of civilization, may now be starting on the downward slope. But where is the hand outstretched to warn us, to bid us halt in our mad career, in our hustling back, step by step, to climb again our primitive tree, to gorge again on the raw nuts of our primitive "Eats"?

ELIZABETH ROBINS PENNELL.